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ABSTRACT

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation as a fundamental human experience and activity. It is also the interpretation of meaning, the realization that human expression contains a meaningful component which must be recognized as such and transposed into one's own system of values and meanings. It describes what seems to happen in conversation, discussion, reading, and writing, all of the activities that teachers participate in, foster, encourage, and assign. Hermeneutics can be used to confront misunderstanding, prejudice, and ideology, and help individuals to step outside their assumptions and examine what they or others know. In hermeneutics the exemplary practice is the conversation, the confrontation with another's thought with the possibility of thus going beyond the limits of one's present horizons. The paper uses examples from college literature classes and concludes that teachers can help use concepts of hermeneutics to create the environment for conversational learning. (Contains 18 references.) (MAH)

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Hermeneutics: What Is It? Is It Critical?

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Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation as a fundamental human experience and activity. Hermeneutics tries to answer the question, what does it mean to "understand"? Once an arcane sub-specialty of Biblical studies, concerned with the problems of interpreting ancient texts, hermeneutics in the last 30 years has quietly influenced anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies, science, politics, and even business.

Hermeneutics, according to Josef Bleicher (p. 1),

> can loosely be defined as the theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning....The realization that human expressions contain a meaningful component, which has to be recognized as such by a subject and transposed into his own system of values and meanings, has given rise to the "problem of hermeneutics."

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The problem has two parts: first, to identify how this process of interpretation "is possible" (p. 1) and takes place, and, second, how we can satisfy the "aim of understanding," which is "the emergence of practically relevant knowledge in which [we ourselves are] changed by being made aware of new possibilities of existence" (p. 3).

If you look at it closely, Bleicher's definition reveals an ambiguous boundary between description and prescription. The question, "How do

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new possibilities of life emerge?" easily slides into a question of what we, especially teachers, can do to make this happen.

However, my own interest in hermeneutics has been heightened and sustained and increased by my experience of its descriptive power: hermeneutics does a good job of describing what seems to happen in conversation, in discussion, in reading, and in writing—all of the activities that we as teachers participate in, foster, encourage, and assign.

In this descriptive dimension—in the sense that the work of hermeneutics, to quote Hans-Georg Gadamer is "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (1989, p. 295)—we always already do hermeneutics. I'll discuss that dimension first.

Then I will take up hermeneutics as a prescriptive practice. Can hermeneutics be *used* to confront misunderstanding, prejudice, and ideology? Can hermeneutics be developed as a critical encounter?

In describing how we learn, reflect, and communicate, hermeneutics immediately raises the great bogeyperson of critical thinking, for hermeneutics proposes, as you can see by Bleicher's definition, that it is *by* our assumptions that we know. Bleicher, remember, said:

> human expressions contain a meaningful component, which has to be recognized as such by a subject and transposed into his own system of values and meanings.

Later, we will have to deal with the question of how, then, can we step outside assumptions ("ideology," "prejudice," "traditions," "world-view," etc.), in order to critically examine what we, or others, know.

But assumptions is far too stringent a concept—suggesting specific propositions, separable, arguable, equivalent to opposing propositions. A

more accurately descriptive concept, which is found in Gadamer's hermeneutics and adopted by others, is that of *horizon*. The descriptive power of this metaphor is instantly recognizable: a horizon connotes the world that is present for you, a circumference of awareness. "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point," says Gadamer (1989, p. 302).

> Horizon is another way of describing context. It includes everything of which one is not immediately aware...but one's horizon is also the context in terms of which the object of attention is understood. (Weinsheimer, p. 157)

Let me give you a classroom example. Tia, a student in one of my literature classes last year, volunteered an interpretation of this haiku:

> The tower high
> I climb; there, on that fir top,
> sits a butterfly.
>
> (Henderson, p. 7)

It symbolizes, she said without irony, the disappointment to be met, "a mere butterfly you could find at the bottom," at the top of the corporate ladder. Tia is typical of my students. For most of them—working adults who head for our downtown campus at five o'clock—even high school literature classes are a hazy memory. Students come to Golden Gate University by the thousands (Golden Gate is California's fifth largest private university) to major in fields that will lead to specific career goals—in accounting, marketing, finance, telecommunications, international management—many of them at the behest of their corporate employers. Question: what happens when the horizon of a 22-year-old

African-American woman, a business major who takes her classes after work, meets the horizon of a Japanese poem? It's clear she grapples with its meaning by transposing its symbolism into her "own system of values." As a "teacher of the poem," this is where I must start.

Horizon should be understood not only spatially but temporally. A horizon includes one's knowledge of the past and also the ways the past works on us whether we know it or not.

> [O]n the whole the power of effective history does not depend on its being recognized. This, precisely, is the power of history over finite human consciousness, namely that it prevails even where faith in methods leads one to deny one's own historicity. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 301)

In other words, our ability to study history does not give us the ability to escape it. Even our methods of study are historically shaped.

Much of a horizon, also, is shared by others, usually those of spatial, temporal, cultural proximity. But a horizon belongs to an individual alone; it is one's "own system of values and meanings," in Bleicher's formula, so it is to a certain extent unique. We are often surprised to discover, among our students, just how unique!

So, across the boundaries of unique horizons, can we understand them and they us? Two important hermeneutic concepts apply here. First, meaning is social. Second, people want and expect to be understood.

"Thinking," says the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (p. 214), or "conceptualization, formulation, comprehension, understanding, or what-have-you, consists not of ghostly happenings in the head but of a matching of the states and processes of symbolic models against the states and

processes of the wider world." At the base of communication is the notion that, in Geertz's famous formulation, "Meaning is public" (p. 12; precisely: "Culture is public because meaning is").

Geertz (p. 215) explains: "Every conscious perception is...an act of recognition, a pairing in which an object (or an event, an act, an emotion) is identified by placing it against the background of an appropriate symbol." That is,

> It is not enough to say that one is conscious *of* something; one is also conscious of something being something....If my eye falls upon an unfamiliar something, I am immediately aware that one term of the match is missing. I ask what [the object] is. (W. Percy, quoted in Geertz, p. 215)

To understand the mysterious object, you are looking, says Geertz, for "an applicable symbolic model under which to subsume the 'unfamiliar something' and so render it familiar" (p. 215). The French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1986, p. 257), in reviewing Geertz's "extrinsic theory," offers this example:

> If we enter into a ceremony and do not know the rules of the ritual, then all the movements are senseless. To understand is to pair what we see with the rules of the ritual....We *see* the movement *as* performing a mass, *as* performing a sacrifice, and so on. The notion of pairing or matching is the central theme.

"Culture patterns," Geertz concludes (p. 216) are 'programs,'; they provide," says Geertz, "a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes." This *seeing as* attests to the fact that meaning is social. It is not just a question of naming it, because if you ask me what it is, and I say, "This is Steve," you will reply that it may very well be Steve in my purely private symbol system, but that doesn't help you understand it. (It may help you understand me.)The problem of cross-cultural or anthropological understanding, as Geertz (p. 13) would have it, is to familiarize ourselves "with the imaginative universe in which their acts are signs"—note the plural possessive "their acts." And this is true for the understanding of signs in all symbol systems: not just acts, but utterances, gestures, and the design of useful and decorative objects, rituals, and so on. "Doing" hermeneutics is like doing that close reading we associate with literary studies—zeroing in on language, plot, time-frame, repetition, and so on.

This suggests that in culture contact—and I prefer Gregory Bateson's (p. 64) expansive definition which includes not only contact "between two communities with different cultures...but also cases of contact within a single community," for example "between the sexes, between old and young, between aristocracy and plebs, between clans, etc."—in culture contact, we begin with those we wish to understand. We begin by asking questions. "We begin," says Geertz (p. 15), "with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those." For "informants," we can read "students."

But perhaps they do not want to "inform" us.

This leads to my next point: people communicate in order to—and with the expectation that they will—be understood. Otherwise, why bother to speak, gesture, write—or listen, watch, and real—if we did not assume and trust that we do or can understand each other or that we are moving toward understanding each other?

Thus Gadamer (1989, p. 385) calls conversation "a process of coming to an understanding."

> [I]t belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. Thus we do not relate the other's opinion to him but to our own opinions and views. Where a person is concerned with the other as individuality—e.g., in a therapeutic conversation or the interrogation of a man accused of a crime—this is not really a situation in which two people are trying to come to an understanding.

And here is where we again run into some trouble with critical thinking. There is much in a classroom setting, with its powerful agenda-setting goals, just as in a therapy session or the back room of a police station, that militates against understanding in Gadamer's sense. Even in the dialogical classroom, Greg Sarris (p. 155) finds, "a dialogue can in fact just

as easily be seen as an allegory, telling the story of a story of power relations between teachers and students and between certain 'bright' students and other 'not-so-bright' students."

Don't misunderstand: hermeneutics, like critical thinking, sees learning as dialogical. But I do see a difference. For example, I'm troubled by Socratic questioning, as it's prescribed by Richard Paul and as I've seen it modeled in numerous videos and sessions here at the conference. In Socratic questioning, says Paul, teachers "probe into student thinking" (p. 272) "to find out what students know or think" (p. 272). "If something said seems questionable, misleading, or false," says Paul (p. 271), "Socratic questioning provides a way of helping students to become self-correcting, rather than relying on correction by the teacher."

This error correction system, as I see it, has several problems. First, false ideas, whatever that means, are connected to powerful social narratives, which remain untouched, or may even be fiercely, covertly defended, especially in the tightly teacher-controlled Socratic model which rather strongly asserts the power allegory Sarris speaks of. Sarris says (p. 153-154):

> Teachers and students are led to believe that some people think critically while others do not, so that those who have critical thinking must teach it to those who do not have it. What is taught is more likely to be a set of cultural norms associated with modes of a specific and culturally based type of critical thought, and the subjects examined are those within a given knowledge base established and maintained in very specific ways. We get

> caught in and perpetuate a kind of vicious circle where those students who don't think the way we do reinforce for us, in their inability to think in a manner we call rational, the need for us to teach them. Intentionally or not, critical thinking is taught as a normalizing device. All that could engender strong sense critical thinking—that which would challenge given assumptions and enable students and teachers to "see beyond the world views that distort their perceptions and impede their ability to reason clearly"—has been effectively excluded.

I find Socratic questioning both manipulative and disingenuous. The Socratic questioner orchestrates the dialogue toward a predictable outcome—usually, in the live examples and videos I've seen, toward exposing some inconsistency, contradiction, double standard, or other fallacy or lack of clarity on an issue.

In hermeneutics the exemplary practice is not this kind of interview but the conversation. Here, again, hermeneutics is *descriptive*, for the exemplary conversation is not just an ideal, it is one in which we've all, one or another time, found ourselves in: the conversation so fascinating, involving, unpredictable we lose ourselves in it; the conversation in which new—not predetermined—knowledge and understanding emerged. This kind of conversation Gadamer (1989, p. 367) compares to play. Just as players are ruled by the game, so in conversation the conversants are "conducted by the subject matter."

> [T]he very fascination of the game for the playing consciousness roots precisely in its being taken up into a movement that has [its own] dynamic. The game is underway when the individual player participates in full earnest, that is, when he no longer holds himself back as one who is merely playing, for whom it is not serious....When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, which is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject matter is at issue in the dialogue and elicits statement and counterstatement and in the end plays them into each other (Gadamer, 1976, p. 66).

In my own recollections of such conversations, I remember them as occasions in which the conversants listened attentively to each other; we wanted fully to understand each other. My best understanding of the subject as the other understood it fashioned my own most interesting, most earnest, thoughtful, and creative—and suprising, unanticipated—responses. I do not believe that every conversation can be like this, but neither do I believe that such conversation must be the rare, happy accident. I think teachers can help create the environment for this type of learning.

This brings me back to the concept of horizon. Like the visual horizon of a traveler, while always finite and limited, the horizon of understanding is open and movable. Not only is a horizon full of things, things move in

and out of the horizon. In appropriating what falls within it, the horizon of values and meanings can be and is transformed. How? Because the things that come into a horizon have their horizons, too. Kwasu's haiku has its horizon. *Hamlet* has its. Eileen Oliver (p. 9), in a book about multiculturalism, recalls hearing Maya Angelou

> speak to a group of students in Minnesota....She talked about a number of mainstream artists whom she encouraged everyone to read. She also laced into her discussion Harlem Renaissance writers like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. Telling her audience that "poetry and music are responsible for keeping us erect," she harkened back to her life in Stamps, Arkansas, where, discovering Shakespeare, she knew that "he wrote for me." She also named Turgenev and Achebe, saying that they too wrote for her. "And," she said, dramatically underscoring her words as only Maya Angelou can do, *"I am worth it!"*

In the sense that Hamlet is *for us*, *Hamlet*'s horizon is, like our own, essentially open. What we do, as teachers, is help make these horizons meet. Our goal is to create the encounter in which a fusion of horizons can occur. This is why Bateson's definition of culture contact makes sense. As teachers, it's not enough to understand *Hamlet.* We have to understand our students. Some teachers protest that they don't want or need to become anthropologists in order to teach. Hermeneutics proposes that we do have to be anthropologists. But hermeneutics also suggests that we can do a great deal of field work in the classroom, familiarizing ourselves, as Geertz

recommends, with the imaginative universe that students' expressions comprise and evoke,.

Let's go back to the phrase "practically relevant knowledge" that Bleicher speaks of as the aim of hermeneutics, the aim of all our efforts at understanding. Humanities education, says Philip Lewin (p. 21), takes responsibility for "the development of that aspect of character reflected in the capacity for mature judgments and practical wisdom, in the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*....The chief means at the disposal of humanities educators to foster *phronesis*," says Lewin "are the artifacts—textual, visual, analytic, performative, and so forth—through which individuals living in varied historical moments" have expressed their own self-understandings.

> We have access, that is, not to these individuals in the moments in which they created, but to their artifice, not to lives, but to stable presences, artifacts, generated out of life. We ask students to engage with these artifacts. It is our belief that through such encounter they will be challenged, enriched, "educated" in the literal sense of finding themselves drawn out. We presuppose that our students already possess a degree of rich experience, and that their exposure to cultural artifacts draws upon that experience, that artifacts are, as it were, resurrected, given new life, as they enter into the stream of students' reflection. Humanities pedagogy must be hermeneutic because humanities education is irreducibly

> hermeneutic; the sense of self is enriched out of encounter with the artifact. Understanding self and understanding the artifact become differentiated moments of the same acts of construction. Knowledge of self and knowledge of artifact ineluctably implicates the other. (Lewin, p. 21-22)

In Lewin's account, the fusion of horizons occurs in an act of appropriation. Appropriation means making something one's own (Lewin, p. 27). One way to describe this in terms of the narrative quality of our self-understanding. Artifacts, says Lewin (p. 28)—a book, a movie, a painting—"are made one's one by taking their place in a narrative originating out of a student's own life." Richard Bernstein (p. 143) says,

> What are we doing (or rather what is happening to us) when we try to understand a horizon other than our own? We already know that....the idea that we can escape our own standpoint and leap into the horizon of [another]—is not the right answer. For this is impossible, and violates Gadamer's claim that we are always ontologically grounded in our situation and horizon. Rather, what we seek to achieve is a "fusion of horizons," a fusion whereby our own horizon is enlarged and enriched.

We all know the feeling, when a book gets under your skin. It won't go away. You keep thinking about it. It affects your vision of the world and your place in it. You interpret the events of your life, past or present, or

speculate on your future, in a new way. Robert Coles (p. 204) talks about "the wonderful mimetic power a novel or a story can have—its capacity to work its way into one's thinking life, yes, but also one's reveries or idle thoughts, even one's moods and dreams."

This is a common experience we've all had—through the experience of meeting and coming to understand someone else, fictional or real, I understand myself better—my habits, my history, my assumptions, whatever. So here in conversation we have all the elements of understanding—self and other.

But what about critique? Do we have the elements for critical consciousness and critical analysis? Hermeneutics proposes that we can enlarge our horizon, but cannot step outside of it. How, then, can we achieve critical distance on our experience, culture, traditions, language, emotional states?

For Gadamer the fusion of horizons—the ability to expand our vision to encompass another horizon—is enough, to make a conversation a critical conversation.

> [T]he language that we speak (or that rather speaks through us) is essentially open to understanding alien horizons. It is through the fusion of horizons that we risk and test our prejudices. In this sense, learning from other forms of life and horizons is at the very same time coming to an understanding of ourselves. (Bernstein, p. 144)

Fusion is always a possibility. Utterances in any language, Gadamer (1989, p. 384-387) notes, can be translated into any other language. But, one may

object, nuances are lost—but what takes place is *more* conversation, a three-way or four-way conversation of speakers and translators, enlarging (not narrowing) the possibility of critique.

In 1994 I was in Vietnam, and I met with Vietnamese professors of American literature in Hanoi—my area is American literature. They teach, they told me, Twain and Hemingway and Faulkner and so on, using texts they have translated into Vietnamese *from Russian!* Are these the conditions for the possibility of a fusion of horizons, a "thick" reading experience? Or only layer upon layer of confusion and distortion?

One philosopher who addresses this directly is Paul Ricoeur. The artifact—object or text—*decontextualizes* itself, says Ricoeur, from the author's intention, the original audience, and the original social environment—"and is able to *recontextualize* itself differently in the act of reading" (1981, p. 91). In appropriation, what is sought is no longer an intention hidden behind the text, but a world unfolded in front of it. In Ricoeur's terms, the "appropriation of the proposed worlds offered by the text passes through the disappropriation" (1981, p. 94), or distanciation, of the self, what Ricoeur calls the "playful metamorphosis of the *ego.*" "In reading," he says, "I 'unrealize myself.'"

As for critique, Ricoeur proposes, the distance of the unrealized self from the self provides the ground for the critical interrogation of the self's illusions—Ricoeur uses the Marxist term "false consciousness" (1981, p. 94). The critique of ideology unfolds within the tension of world and self and possible world and possible self. According to Ricoeur (1981, p. 112), "[w]hat is to be interpreted...is a proposed world which I could inhabit and in which I could project my ownmost possibilities." These possibilities, Kevin J. Vanhoozer (p. 49) explains, are possibilities for action: "The

world projected by the work allows one to explore possibilities of action and so have 'fictive experiences.' By 'fictive experience' Ricoeur understands a virtual manner of inhabiting the proposed world." In other words, education provides the opportunity for adults to inhabit new stories and new versions of the self.

Here is one final student example. Diane is aware of how she uses literature: it affords her a new perspective of work, school, friends, and herself. She incorporates her understanding of literary characters and worlds into her own life. An immigrant from Hong Kong, she has used literature to ease her way into American culture:

> Most of my friends are either immigrants or they grew up in Hong Kong and then came here, so many of us did not have such a dramatic experience of dual cultures. So by reading *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston I get a perspective on new friends when I do meet them. I can understand part of where they're coming from.

Here she comments on her use of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*:

> Right now I work in a brokerage firm. That was very much depicted in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. I read the play, I've seen the movie, so when I started in the brokerage firm I go, "Oh, I wonder if it's going to be like that," and it was. There's foul language, people slamming their phones—it's like that, but it's not that much of a surprise to me. I see them every day making the pitch, and

> that's real. If you don't know what it's like in a brokerage firm, you see *Wall Street*, you think, "Oh, all these well-dressed, slick looking people"—it's not like that, it's like *Glengarry Glen Ross*, everyone has their tie off, and they get frustrated from making the pitches and clients dumping on them. It's not like *Wall Street* with Michael Douglas, but you won't know that unless you experience it yourself or you read about it. So I recommend it to the brokers: "Did you guys see *Glengarry Glen Ross*? You'd really get a kick out of it."

For Diane, literature shows possibilities—that may become actualities—and in the case of *Glengarry* provides a critique of the world it depicts: *Glengarry* presents capitalism in claustrophobic miniature, the intensity of competition driving its real estate salesmen to virtual cannibalism. Since Diane encountered the fictive "reality" first, from the critical distance we can have on a text, she enters the brokerage firm forearmed. "The power of the text to open a dimension of reality," says Ricoeur (1981, p. 93), "implies in principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real." The emotional or moral climate of the real brokerage office is stripped of an aura of necessity, of inevitability. The brokers' behavior is of *a* world, not *the* world. Thus Diane is partially protected by Mamet's critique as she struggles to find a work environment that is authentic to her. This is practical knowledge.

The opportunity for experiences like this is multiplied through discussion, a kind of collective re-appropriation of a work in which the

students' self-narratives come into focus for examination, in which, as Richard Rorty (1995) has said, a newly encountered work of literature can recontextualize what they already know rather than be recontextualized by it. "Only in conversation, only in confrontation with another's thought that could also come to dwell within us, can we hope to go beyond the limits of our present horizon. For this reason philosophical hermeneutics recognizes no principle higher than dialogue" (Grondin, p. 124).

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